

When the novel was published on March 14, 1939, 50,000 copies were on order, a remarkable number for a Depression-era book. By the end of April, *The Grapes of Wrath* was selling 2,500 copies a day. By May, it was the number-one bestseller and was selling 10,000 copies a week. At the end of the year, close to a half-million copies had been sold. It was the top seller of 1939 and remained a best-seller throughout 1940. Since then, the novel has been continuously in print.

Despite its overwhelming popularity, the novel did not receive only favorable reviews. Journalists who wrote early reviews in the newspapers were not particularly impressed with the book. Steinbeck had broken many of the "rules" of fiction writing with his novel. Several reviewers could not understand the novel's unconventional structure. In *Newsweek*, Burton Roscoe wrote that the book has some "magnificent passages" but that it also contains factual errors (including statements that the Dust Bowl extended into eastern Oklahoma when that region of the state had actually remained fertile) and misleading propaganda. A reviewer in *Time* magazine criticized the chapters that did not describe the Joads' story, saying they were "not a successful fiction experiment." In the *New Yorker*, Clifton Fadiman wrote that the novel "dramatizes so that you cannot forget the terrible facts of a wholesale injustice committed by society," yet he also wrote that the latter half of the book was "too detailed."

Similarly, other critics found fault with the structure of the novel. Louis Kronenberger in the *Nation* and Malcolm Cowley in the *New Republic* criticized the latter half of the book and particularly the ending. Other magazine reviewers, especially those writing for monthlies and literary quarterlies, did not focus entirely on the sociological aspects of the novel and considered its artistic merit. These reviewers, on the whole, recognized that Steinbeck had written a seminal and innovative novel. The editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Edward Weeks, wrote that it was a "novel whose hunger, passion, and poetry are in direct answer to Page 116 | [Top of Article](#) the angry stirring of our conscience these past seven years." Weeks found the novel almost "too literal, too unsparing," yet he could "only hope that the brutality dodgers will take my word for it that it is essentially a healthy and disciplined work of art."

In the *North American Review*, Charles Angoff defended the novel: "With his latest novel, Mr. Steinbeck at once joins the company of Hawthorne, Melville, Crane and Norris, and easily leaps to the forefront of all his contemporaries. The book has all the earmarks of something momentous, monumental, and memorable.... The book has the proper faults: robust looseness and lack of narrative definiteness—faults such as can be found in the Bible, *Moby-Dick*, *Don Quixote*, and *Jude the Obscure*. The greater artists almost never conform to the rules of their art as set down by those who do not practice it."

One early reviewer who summed up the novel's greatness was Joseph Henry Jackson in the *New York Herald Tribune Books*. Jackson was the book editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and had followed Steinbeck's career. He wrote in his review of April 16, 1939, that the novel was the finest book that Steinbeck had written. The review stated: "It is easy to grow lyrical about *The Grapes of Wrath*, to become excited about it, to be stirred to the shouting point by it. Perhaps it is too easy to lose balance in the face of such an extraordinarily moving performance. But it is also true that the effect of the book lasts. The author's employment, for example, of occasional chapters in which the undercurrent of the book is announced, spoken as a running accompaniment to the story, with something of the effect of the sound track in Pare Lorentz's

The River—that lasts also, stays with you, beats rhythmically in your mind long after you have put the book down. No, the reader's instant response is more than quick enthusiasm, more than surface emotionalism. This novel of America's new disinherited is a magnificent book. It is, I think for the first time, the whole Steinbeck, the mature novelist saying something he must say and doing it with the sure touch of the great artist."

Criticism

Richard Henry

In this overview of The Grapes of Wrath, Henry, a professor at the University of Minnesota, declares that Steinbeck's work still has relevance today, as it addresses the distinct issues of social classes and the importance of community.

The Grapes of Wrath is arguably John Steinbeck's finest novel and the summation of his California experience. His first two novels received little attention from the critics or the public. His third, *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a novel set in his native Monterey, found a national audience. He followed this success with *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937), novels that explore the conditions suffered by migrant workers in California. These conditions were made worse by the massive influx of Midwesterners who had fled the drought and the economic depression of the 1930s. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) recounts the plight of the underclass in the story of the Joads, a family from Oklahoma, who lose their farm and travel to California, the land of milk and honey, only to find their hopes and expectations dashed. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940.

The Grapes of Wrath traces the decline of the family and the rise of the community as the basic unit of social structure in the United States. What precipitated this evolution is a social and economic situation that no longer allowed family farms to provide enough income for a family to survive. With the industrial revolution and the development of tractors, family farms were giving way to factory farming. One of the difficulties Steinbeck faced was how to demonstrate the shared plight of hundreds of thousands of displaced peoples without lapsing into abstractions. On the other hand, were he to tell the story of one person or one family, he would risk obscuring the universal nature of their distress. Steinbeck resolved this problem in several ways. By writing his narrative in the third person and diffusing attention across several characters, he prevents readers from sympathizing too closely with any one individual. To support his universal thesis, Steinbeck intersperses chapters within the Joads' story that move the narrative away from the Joads in order to discuss Judeo-Christian and American sociopolitical traditions that relate to the novel's themes.

Of the novel's thirty chapters, only fourteen tell the story of the Joads. The other sixteen chapters offer thematic or symbolic counterpoints to the story of the Joads. An early chapter, for example, follows a turtle's indomitable progress over the land and across a highway, where it is struck by a passing vehicle. Subsequently, the seeds caught on the turtle's shell are inadvertently planted as they are plowed into the soil. The turtle serves as a sym-Page 117 | [Top of Article](#)bol for the Okies, their movement, and their indomitable will, which tie their destiny to the land.

Other chapters, from descriptions of apocalyptic dust and floods, to the presentation of used-car salesmen, the selling of household items, and the flight of 200,000 migrants over Route 66, expand the focus beyond the particular plight of the Joads. Steinbeck augments this movement from the particular to the universal by employing a diversity of narrative styles, thereby giving voice to a nation in transition. For example, in one chapter he uses the cadences of a used-car salesman trying to fast-talk his customers. In other chapters, he employs the diction, phrasing, and sentence structures of the Bible, of the poets Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, and of the colloquial speech patterns of the Okies. Still other chapters follow the conventions of journalism and documentaries.

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What Do I Read Next?

- *In Dubious Battle*, (1936), is John Steinbeck's first book of a trilogy by the author that looks at the migrant labor problem in the 1930s. The novel focuses on labor organizers and a strike in California's apple fields. The book caused controversy when it was published.
- *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is the second book in Steinbeck's trilogy of migrant farmers. It is about two migrants, one who is mentally handicapped, and how their dreams of a better life can never be realized because of the oppressive social system.
- Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885) is set in a French mining town. The main character in the novel, Etienne Lantier, witnesses how the families of the working class are destroyed by a social environment that sees people only as disposable resources. It is a fate that Etienne is unable to change.
- *The Octopus* (1901) by Frank Norris, is the first in Norris's "Trilogy of the Wheat." It is set in the San Joaquin Valley of California and addresses the abuses of railroad companies on the local wheat farmers. Norris was concerned with the question of how a Judeo-Christian ethic can exist in a harsh and uncaring world
- In the nonfiction book *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*, (1939) by Carey McWilliams, the author takes a look at the migrant labor problem in his study published the same year as *The Grapes of Wrath*.
- Justin Kaplan's *Lincoln Steffens: A Biography* (1974) is a look at one of the most famous muckrakers of American journalism. Steffens wrote a series of articles in 1902–1903 that exposed corruption in various city governments. He was one of America's renowned social critics and a great voice for reform. As an old man living in Carmel, California, in the 1930s, he and John Steinbeck became friends, and Steffens was the link who provided Steinbeck with his knowledge of migrant labor and contacts with union organizers that eventually led to his assignment to cover the migrants for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Kaplan's book won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.
- James N. Gregory's *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl and Okie Culture in California* (1989) is an account of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s and the migration to California depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The novel is divided loosely into thirds, according to the setting of the action. In Oklahoma, the Joads ready themselves for their journey; across Route 66, they flee the Dust Bowl for the promised land; and, in California, they attempt to make a new life for themselves. This division supports a pointed analogy to the Old Testament exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt to Canaan. The Dust Bowl's drought and the banks' persecutions parallel Egypt's plagues and the Pharaoh's oppressions. The journey undertaken by hundreds of thousands of displaced Midwesterners is similar to that of the Hebrews. California is the land of milk and honey, but its citizens are less than welcoming to the migrants. Page 118 | [Top of Article](#) Similarly, Canaan, the promised land of the Old Testament, resisted the influx of Hebrews. More specific parallels follow from the analogy. For example, the family name of Joad invokes Judah; the slaughtering of pigs just before the Joads depart is similar to the sacrifice of lambs; and the grandparents die on the journey, just as do the elders during the exodus. These and other references to the Old Testament help Steinbeck universalize the Joads, though not without cost. Some critics have found that by the end of the novel, Ma, Tom, Rose of Sharon, and the other characters serve little more than an allegorical or symbolic function. They, therefore, seem to lose some of their human appeal.

The novel also has its parallels to the New Testament in its language, imagery, and the values it conveys. Jim Casy's teachings and his self-sacrifice evoke Jesus Christ's teachings and his sacrifice. From this perspective, parallels emerge between the twelve Joads and the twelve apostles. Connie, for example, is a Judas figure who leaves the family for an alleged three dollars a day. As strong as these references to the Judeo-Christian tradition are, however, *The Grapes of Wrath* is not an exercise in piety. Steinbeck strikes a decidedly anti-religious tone early in the novel, where Casy explains why he has given up his ministry. Moreover, the evangelists who preach sin and damnation in the camps are treated with scorn.

A second major strain of social and political thought comes from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America. Casy recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson and his theory of the transcendental oversoul when he says that everyone "jus' got a little piece of a great big soul," an idea that is later picked up by Tom. But Emerson's emphasis on individualism falls by the wayside in Steinbeck's novel. When he shares his string of rabbits with Tom and Casy, Muley Graves gives an early nod to the novel's communal undertones: "I ain't got no choice in the matter," he says, "... if a fella's got somepin to eat an' another fella's hungry—why, the first fella ain't got no choice." From the Wilsons' sharing of their resources with the Joads on the road, to the final scene—Rose of Sharon's giving her breast milk to a starving man—the novel displays the importance of a mass democracy.

Ma recognizes that the power of the people is in their community. She worries Tom will do something foolish after learning that the banks have foreclosed on farms throughout Oklahoma: "Tommy, don't you go fightin' 'em alone. They'll hunt you down like a coyote. Tommy, I got to thinkin' an' dreamin' an' wonderin'. They say there's a hun'erd thousand of us shoved out. If we was all mad the same way, Tommy—they wouldn't hunt nobody down—." The novel also demonstrates the pragmatism of philosophers William James and John Dewey, who argued that political, social, or economic ideas are only important or relevant in their practical consequences in the world. The world in *The Grapes of Wrath* is a world of action.

Although Steinbeck gave a democratic voice to the migrant workers, the emphasis upon community and the general critique of capitalism and exploitation led to early charges that the novel advocated communist principles. Protests followed, fueled in part by the character Jim Casy's rejection of religion. These protests focused attention not on the novel as a work of literature, but on issues of representation and whether it depicted reality or was merely propaganda. There was little doubt that the social and economic conditions of the migrant workers were as Steinbeck reported. He had toured the Hoovervilles and had worked with the migrants in 1936. Issues of representation, therefore, were not about the specific details of the Hoovervilles and the orchards, but about the entire socioeconomic system, whether or not it was failing, and what to do about it. In this debate, the Joads moved from the world of fiction to impact the real world, much as earlier novels (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example) had forced social change. This debate continues in light of the social, political, and economic changes in the fifty years since the novel's publication. Although the Joads, Jim Casy, and the thousands of migrants are firmly rooted in the circumstances of the 1930s, *The Grapes of Wrath* also rewards interpretations informed by more recent trends in criticism. Thus, the novel is still relevant with regard to questions about the role of children in the novel, the distinct issues of class, and the decided victimization of people of other races or nationalities.

Source: Richard Henry, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1999.

Howard Levant

In the following excerpt, Levant discusses Steinbeck's individual and universal characterizations of the Joads.

[In *The Grapes of Wrath*, function], not mere design, is ... evident in the use of characterization to support and develop a conflict of opposed ideas—mainly a struggle between law and anarchy. The one idea postulates justice in a moral world of love and work, identified in the past with "the people" and in the present with the government camp and finally with the union movement, since these are the modern, institutional forms the group may take. The opposed idea postulates injustice in an immoral world of hatred and starvation. It is associated with buccaneering capitalism, which, in violent form, includes strikebreaking and related practices that cheapen human labor.

The Joads present special difficulties in characterization. They must be individualized to be credible and universalized to carry out their representative functions. Steinbeck meets these problems by making each of the Joads a specific individual and by specifying that what happens to the Joads is typical of the times. The means he uses to maintain these identities can be shown in some detail. The least important Joads are given highly specific tags—Grandma's religion, Grandpa's vigor, Uncle John's melancholy, and Al's love of cars and girls. The tags are involved in events; they are not inert labels. Grandma's burial violates her religion; Grandpa's vigor ends when he leaves the land; Uncle John's melancholy balances the family's experience; Al helps to drive the family to California and, by marrying, continues the family. Ma, Pa, Rose of Sharon, and Tom carry the narrative, so their individuality is defined by events rather than through events. Ma is the psychological and moral center of the family; Pa carries its burdens; Rose of Sharon means to ensure its physical continuity; and Tom becomes its moral conscience. On the

larger scale, there is much evidence that what happens to the family is typical of the times. The interchapters pile up suggestions that "the whole country is moving" or about to move. The Joads meet many of their counterparts or outsiders who are in sympathy with their ordeal; these meetings reenforce the common bond of "the people." Both in the interchapters and the narrative, the universal, immediate issue is survival—a concrete universal.

On the other hand, the individualized credibility of the Joads is itself the source of two difficulties: the Joads are too different, as sharecroppers, to suggest a universal or even a national woe, and they speak an argot that might limit their universal quality. Steinbeck handles these limitations with artistic license. The narrative background contains the Joads' past; their experience as a landless proletariat is highlighted in the narrative foreground. The argot is made to seem a typical language within the novel in three ways: It is the major language; people who are not Okies speak variations of their argot; and that argot is not specialized in its relevance, but is used to communicate the new experiences "the people" have in common as a landless proletariat. However, because these solutions depend on artistic license, any tonal falseness undermines severely the massive artistic truthfulness the language is intended to present. So the overly editorial tone in several of the interchapters has a profoundly false linguistic ring, although the tonal lapse is limited and fairly trivial in itself.

The Joads are characterized further in comparison with four Okie types who refuse to know or are unable to gain the knowledge the family derives from its collective experience. They are the stubborn, the dead, the weak, and the backtrackers; they appear in the novel in that order.

Muley Graves is the stubborn man, as his punning name suggests. He reveals himself to Tom and Casy near the beginning of the novel. His refusal to leave Oklahoma is mere stubbornness; his isolation drives him somewhat mad. He is aware of a loss of reality, of "jus' wanderin' aroun' like a damn ol' graveyard ghos'," and his blind violence is rejected from the beginning by the strongest, who oppose his pessimism with an essential optimism.

Deaths of the aged and the unborn frame the novel. Grandpa and Grandma are torn up by the roots and die, incapable of absorbing a new, terrible experience. Rose of Sharon's baby, born dead at the end of the novel, is an index of the family's ordeal and a somewhat contrived symbol of the necessity to form the group.

The weak include two extremes within the Joad family. Noah Joad gives up the struggle to survive; he finds a private peace. His character is shadowy, and his choice is directed more clearly by Steinbeck than by any substance within him. Connie has plenty of substance. He is married to Rose of Sharon and deserts her because he has no faith in the family's struggle to reach California. His faith is absorbed in the values of "the Bank," in getting on, in money, in any abstract goal. He wishes to learn about technology in order to rise in the world. He does not admire technique for itself, as Al does. He is a sexual performer, but he loves no one. Finally, he wishes that he had stayed behind in Oklahoma and taken a job driving a tractor. In short, with Connie, Steinbeck chooses brilliantly to place a "Bank" viewpoint within the family. By doing so, he precludes a simplification of character and situation, and he endorses the complexity of real people in the real world. (*In Dubious Battle* is similarly free of schematic characterization.) In addition, the family's tough, humanistic values gain in credibility by their contrast with

Connie's shallow, destructive modernity. The confused gas station owner and the pathetic one-eyed junkyard helper are embodied variations on Connie's kind of weakness. Al provides an important counterpoint. He wants to leave the family at last, like Connie, but duty and love force him to stay. His hard choice points the moral survival of the family and measures its human expense.

The Joads meet several backtrackers. The Wilsons go back because Mrs. Wilson is dying; the Joads do not stop, in spite of death. The ragged man's experience foreshadows what the Joads find in California; but they keep on. Some members of the Joad family think of leaving but do not, or they leave for specific reasons—a subtle variation on backtracking. Al and Uncle John wish deeply at times to leave, but they stay; Tom leaves (as Casy does) but to serve the larger, universal family of the group. Backtracking is a metaphor, then, a denial of life, but always a fact as well. The factual metaphor is deepened into complexity because the Joads sympathize with the backtrackers' failure to endure the hardships of the road and of California, in balance with where they started from—the wasteland—while knowing they cannot accept that life-denying solution. All of these choices are the fruit of the family's experience.

A fifth group of owners and middle-class people are accorded no sympathetic comprehension, as contrasted with the Joads, and, as in *In Dubious Battle*, their simply and purely monstrous characterization is too abstract to be fully credible. The few exceptions occur in highly individualized scenes or episodes (Chapter XV is an example) in which middle-class "shitheels" are caricatures of the bad guys, limited to a broad contrast with the good guys (the truck drivers, the cook), who are in sympathy with a family of Okies. This limitation has the narrative advantage of highlighting the importance and vitality of the Okies to the extent that they seem by right to belong in the context of epic materials, but the disadvantage of shallow characterization is severe. Steinbeck can provide a convincing detailed background of the conditions of the time; he cannot similarly give a rounded, convincing characterization to an owner or a disagreeable middle-class person.

On the whole, then, fictive strength and conviction are inherent in the materials of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The noticeable flaws are probably irreducible aspects of the time context and of narrative shorthand counterpointed by a complex recognition of human variety in language and behavior.

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Source: Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*, University of Missouri Press, 1974, pp. 104-108.